

recent surveys of eastern rainforest areas. It is often seen perched in a tree, but prey is usually picked from the ground. At Marojejy Strict Nature Reserve in August to October 1988, 27 sightings of this species were all at altitudes below 1,000 m, despite considerable effort above this level. This suggests a preference for low to mid altitudes, although the upper limit clearly varies geographically. Perhaps the most bizarre of the rainforest species is the Scaly Ground-roller *B. squamiger*. Its superbly scaled pattern, with shades of bronze, green and rufous, contrasts quite unexpectedly with bright pink legs and (unfeathered) eye patch, and sky-blue tail tip. It is highly terrestrial, running and stopping, rummaging in leaf litter or pulling up earthworms, and disappearing with ease in tangled rainforest undergrowth. This, too, seems to be a lowland species, best known from the Masoala Peninsula, but it occurs patchily as far as the extreme south-east (and in Mantady National Park, close to Périnet). The fifth species, the Long-tailed

Ground-roller *Uratelornis chimaera*, is restricted to a small portion of the south-western spiny forest, north of the town of Toliara. The bird behaves fairly like the *Atelornis* species, but is rather easier to see in its more open habitat, raising and lowering its tail like a gigantic prinia. Its habitat is unprotected and threatened with destruction and degradation, making this species and the equally extraordinary Subdesert Mesite *Montias benschi* (restricted to the same area) among the highest priorities for bird conservation in the Afrotropics. Their best-known haunt, near Ifaty, is becoming terribly degraded by wood extraction, mainly for charcoal production. The extent of such degradation, and its effect on the birds, are urgent topics for investigation.

How rare and threatened are these birds? The rainforest species are increasingly widely recorded, but mostly in undisturbed forest. They certainly occur at high density in some places, but have not been found in others. Thus, they seem to be patchily distributed

within their preferred habitat zone, as are many tropical forest birds. This makes risk assessment very difficult, but more surveys are being undertaken annually and casual observations can certainly add to knowledge. Here, therefore, are five good reasons to visit Madagascar; the visitor will find many more!

Acknowledgments

This article was inspired by the superb photographs taken by Pete Morris and Paul Thompson. The text is based on Langrand's *Guide to the birds of Madagascar* (Yale, 1990), Collar & Stuart's *Threatened birds of Africa and related islands* (ICBP, 1985), two papers in *Bird Conservation International* vol 2, no 3 (Evans et al, Marojejy Strict Nature Reserve, pp 201-220 and Thompson & Evans, Ambatovaky Special Reserve, pp 221-237), conversations with Frank Hawkins and Nigel Collar, and personal experience. ☺

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Photospot: Sharpe's Longclaw *Macronyx sharpei*

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Being rather large of foot, I am especially fond and sympathetic towards longclaws. With their perilous peregrinating over the tangled turf, it seems that nature has handicapped them unfairly. In truth, however, long hind claws are adaptations for coping better with the tussocky grass which is their preferred habitat. Eight species of longclaws are recognised and they are confined to Africa, although they do look remarkably like the meadowlarks of the New World (*Sturnella*, Icteridae), a fascinating example of convergent evolution¹. All are characterised by cryptic, well-patterned backs, and striking red, yellow or orange underparts.

Longclaws have a rather perky upright stance and perform short jerky flights (often onto low bushes) during which they reveal bright white outer tail feathers. On the basis of plumage, habits and song, most authorities consider Sharpe's Longclaw to be in the genus *Macronyx*^{1,2}. It is probably the closest to the true pipits of the longclaws and,

along with the Yellow-breasted Pipit *Anthus chloris*, has been placed in *Hemimacronyx* by some authors^{3,4} (and has been called Kenyan Yellow-breasted Pipit too⁵).

Listed as a candidate species in the Red Data Book⁵, Sharpe's Longclaw is considered to be near-threatened in the most recent assessment, *Birds to Watch* 2⁶. It is undoubtedly a bird of limited range, being confined to the montane grasslands from 2,000-3,400 m in west and central Kenya, from Mount Elgon (where it has been proposed as a possible contender for the Ugandan side as well), to both sides of the Rift Valley including the Mau and Kinangop plateaux and both the Aberdares and Mount Kenya^{1,7}.

In common with other longclaws, Sharpe's can be hard to spot when its back is turned, with its upperparts blending with the vegetation. As Dave Cottridge's photos reveal, it is only when the bird turns front-on that the bright yellow can be seen. Sharpe's is the smallest longclaw and lacks a black

necklace (Grimwood's is the only other necklace-less species). Confusion is only likely, with Yellow-throated *Macronyx croceus*, but it is largely allopatric, occurring at lower altitudes than Sharpe's, so there should be no chance of overlap^{1,7}. Yellow-throated is also larger, has a black necklace, and significantly more white in the tail. Two other species occur in Kenya. Rosy-breasted *Macronyx ameliae*, which has a pretty pink throat, inhabits damp grassland in the south-west (including the Mara). Pangani *Macronyx aurantiigula* occurs in the south-east and largely prefers drier country.

The ecology and behaviour of Sharpe's Longclaw is not well known. Often found in pairs or small family groups, they are rather retiring, although easier to approach when the weather is cold or windy (which it very often is in the Kenya highlands!).¹ The sexes are similar, but the male is generally more clearly marked and brighter yellow below.



Sharpe's Longclaw *Macronyx sharpei*, Kenya, November 1994 (David M. Cottridge)
Sentinelle de Sharpe *Macronyx sharpei*, Kenya, novembre 1994 (David M. Cottridge)



Black-cheeked Lovebird *Agapornis nigrigenis*, feeding on the ground, Machile River,
south-west Zambia, November 1994 (Tim Dodman)
Inséparable à joues noires *Agapornis nigrigenis* se nourrit par terre, Fleuve de Machile,
sud-ouest de Zambie, novembre 1994 (Tim Dodman)

In common with other longclaws (and the meadowlarks), Sharpe's hide a well-constructed nest at the foot of a rough grass tussock or small shrub. Birds breed during the rains, from March to June, and September to October, and may rely on a rain-generated flush of grass for nest-building. Males will sing from posts and tussocks, but also perform an aerial display above their breeding ground. Circling with a combination of flaps and glides, they sing a rather sad series of rising whistles, before dropping to ground with dangling legs. Two to three eggs are laid and adult birds are reputed to lead predators away from their nests with classic distraction displays, by dragging their wings and performing short stumbling flights.

Birders hoping to see Sharpe's Longclaw should look out for them in the rough grassland *en route* to Kieni forest. From Nairobi, take the Nakuru road (the A104). Just before it drops down the escarpment to Naivasha, turn right towards Thika (in fact you take a slip road to the left and cross via a flyover signposted to Longonot and South Kinangop on the D396). After

passing through a village, and leaving the C68 to Magumu on your left, you come an area of fenced and grazed grassland (with deep roadside ditches). Although it can take a while to spot them, Sharpe's Longclaws can be found in the fields on either side of the road.

If anyone has unpublished records of Sharpe's Longclaw, please send them to Luc Lens at the Department of Ornithology, National Museums of Kenya, P.O. Box 40658 Nairobi, Kenya. In an attempt to learn more of its ecology, Luc and colleagues are studying the longclaw (and another little-known East African endemic, Jackson's Widowbird *Euplectes jacksoni*) on the Kinangop plateau. A short preliminary survey late in 1994 discovered reasonable numbers, but conversion of their habitat to commercially valuable timber plantations remains a major threat to this bird of seriously restricted range. ♀

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Review



SASOL Birds of the Kruger National Park

Guy Gibbon. £22.99

This 90 minute video and sound guide features 250 species regularly found within the Kruger National park and appears designed to complement the many excellent field guides to the birds of Southern Africa currently available. Its use is not restricted to birders visiting this renowned park or southern Africa as the vast majority of species are found elsewhere within the continent.

The video's photographic and production quality is excellent with many mouthwatering close-up shots of desirable species such as Pel's Fishing Owl *Scotopelia peli*, Three-banded

Cursor *Cursorius cinctus*, White-backed Night Heron *Gorsachius leuconotus*, Mozambique Nightjar *Caprimulgus forsteri* and Martial Eagle *Polemaetus bellicosus* to name just a few.

The birds themselves have been arranged into the relevant habitat or group section which includes: bushveld, grassland, water, raptors and nightbirds. Each bird is titled in both Afrikaans and English although for a worldwide audience the inclusion of scientific names would help clear up any confusion arising from unfamiliar vernacular names.

All in all, this is a superb video and an extremely useful tool in improving identification skills. Offering excellent value for money, anyone wishing to visit

the region or perhaps just wanting to rekindle old memories should take a look for themselves. ♀

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